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# **THE INTERSECTION OF THE PANDEMIC AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY**

A large, abstract graphic on the right side of the page consists of a diagonal blue band. Within this band are several overlapping geometric shapes: a large white circle, a smaller white circle, a yellow circle, a white hexagon, and a light blue circle. These shapes are connected by thin white lines, suggesting a network or interconnected concepts.

**Dr. Martin Shain,  
Neighbour at  
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# THE INTERSECTION OF THE PANDEMIC AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Sparked by a global pandemic and the exposure of several social injustices, society has seen significant social disruption. These issues do not stop at workplace doors and often impact not only the physical safety of employees, but also their mental and psychological safety.

Dr. Martin Shain of the [Neighbour at Work Centre](#) presented at the [2021 Campbell Institute Symposium](#) and now writes on psychological safety for the EHS Matters blog.

## What is Psychological Safety?

Psychological safety is a state in which workers are free from exposure to reasonably foreseeable, significant risks to their mental health arising from the acts and omissions of other people in the workplace so there is a low risk of mental injury.

Psychological safety calls for a workplace culture where people are careful to avoid preventable injuries to one another's mental health by making a deliberate effort to:

- Be aware of how they affect others within their circles of influence
- Understand and accommodate (up to a reasonable standard) the rights, needs and interests of those others

Another important aspect of psychological safety is feeling free to speak out and speak up about important matters without fear of retribution from supervisors, managers and other workers.

When awareness, understanding, carefulness and freedom to speak up are the norm within a workplace, there is likely to be a greater sense of community ("we're all in this together"). However, this is unlikely to develop on its own and usually requires deliberate leadership to bring it about.

One leading safety association in Canada has found it useful to use a "cultural tool" for leaders called "Neighbours at Work" to symbolize and personify the "3Be" Imperatives – be aware, be understanding and be careful (<http://www.neighbouratwork.com>).

## Leveraging Lessons Learned

The pandemic hit the workplace when many organizations, large and small, were not anywhere near this level of psychological safety. As a result, employers had little to rely upon to create a sense among workers that they were all in this battle together.

This lack of shared identity was alienating and demoralizing for many as they struggled with how to maintain their mental health in the face of grave uncertainties and dangers.

Ironically, the pandemic did spur some organizations to address the issue of community, but in many cases they simply floundered and resorted to recommending self help measures rather than addressing systemic issues of mistrust and alienation among workers.

However, some organizations recognized – perhaps as they always had – that taking every reasonable precaution to keep workers physically safe – whether in real or virtual settings – showed workers they were valued and cared for. So providing appropriate PPE, materials and time for sanitization, enforcing social distancing, creating opportunities for virtual social support and referrals to EAPs all helped give employees the sense that they were valued as people, not just as cogs in a wheel. In other words, carefully taking care of workers’ physical safety translated into mental health promotion.

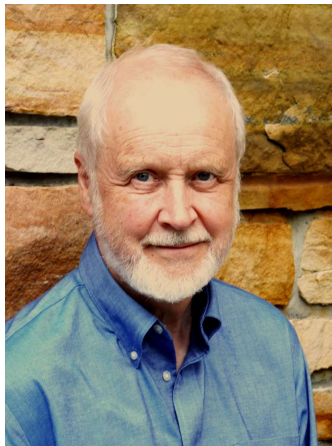
As many employees ended up working from home, this created another challenge for employers to keep people safe. Some employers took this as an opportunity to reach out in ways not previously done by offering both social and material support to workers to function safely and effectively from their homes. This benefited both their physical and psychological safety.

### **Returning to Work**

Ultimately, many workers will one day return to the physical workplace. This will create a fresh set of issues for employers as they work to rebuild an enduring sense of community while getting the organization back on its feet again. How employees were treated while working from home will no doubt have a significant impact on how successful a return to the physical workplace will be.

Considered from another perspective, the return to a physical workplace can be an opportunity to revisit what a psychologically safe environment can, and should, look like.

New or reinvigorated policies and programs aimed at sustaining the cultural norms of awareness, understanding and carefulness may offer organizations a new lease on life for the benefit of all. This should also help organizations prepare for any future crises from external forces, such as pandemics.



Dr. Martin Shain is the principal and founder of the Neighbour at Work Centre, a consulting agency in workplace mental safety and health. He is an adjunct lecturer at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto. In his role as an academic lawyer Martin wrote two policy papers that laid out the legal foundations and general specifications for the Canadian National Standard on Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace. His fifth book, “The Careful Workplace”, was published by Thomson Reuters in 2016. Currently he is partnering with Workplace Safety and Prevention Services in the development of education and training resources for the OH&S community.